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VISIT FIREFY LANDS

By MARGARET DAVIS

UTAH can be easily overlooked among the huge range of holiday destinations on offer in a country as vast as the United States.

Mention Salt Lake City (pictured above) to any Brit, and it will conjure up images of Mormons, weak beer and the 2002 Winter Olympics.

In fact, Utah has much more to offer than that, especially for holidaymakers wanting to escape the daily grind and shake off the cobwebs in a spectacular outdoor playground.

The western state is perhaps best known for skiing and winter sports, but remains a quite breathtaking rocky wilderness when there is no snow on the ground.

Its landscape ranges from Alpine-esque mountains to the red rock made famous by the

movie *Thelma and Louise* and legendary cowboy actor John Wayne.

The Swiss Mormons who first settled in Midway's Heber Valley, less than an hour's

drive from Salt Lake City airport, were drawn to the Wasatch Mountains because they were reminded of their home nation.

Their legacy lives on in a slightly eccentric shape at the Swiss-themed Zermatt resort, where visitors are greeted by a bronze statue of a bear playing an accordion – in tribute to a man who would don fancy dress every year on Swiss Day.

Meticulous attention has been paid to the interior and it is a very relaxing place to stay.

Even in the absence of snow, the area is a beautiful place to visit. In early October we were treated to the blazing reds and yellows of the autumn leaves – a perfect

backdrop for pony trekking in the foothills nearby.

It was a fun and novel way to see the countryside, and meant we could avoid crawling up steep slopes ourselves.

Fly-fishing is also on offer nearby, while more sedate visitors can sample a unique geological feature.

The Homestead Resort, opposite Zermatt in Midway, boasts a natural crater filled with warm spring water all year round, encased by a beehive dome of rock.

Further south, the landscape radically changes with Grand Canyon-style scenery.

Fuel yourself up for a walk at Ray's in Green River, a genuine American road house.

This is the beginning of film-set style surroundings which leave visitors with a huge smile.

Climax

Dead Horse Point, half a mile from where the dramatic climax of *Thelma and Louise* was filmed, gives a jaw-dropping view, looking out over the Colorado River. Without the water, you could be forgiven for thinking you were on Mars.

The spine-tingling sights continue in Arches National Park, with its monoliths and sheer rock faces. Utah is simply vast, and it is a unique feeling to be surrounded by yawning miles of natural landscape.

But visitors do not just come to stand and stare. A wide range of

outdoor activities are available throughout the year.

For the more adventurous, there is white-water rafting on the Colorado River, led by expert guides.

It's genuine fun for any group, with stretches of calm, flat water punctuated by adrenalin-pumping rapids.

Moab, the small town where raft operator Sheri Griffiths is based, attracts hordes of active types all through the summer and has a sprinkling of shops, bars and restaurants which cater for the crowds.

It has a friendly and welcoming feel, including great food, but if you fancy a few drinks after dinner remember to take ID with you. In some bars you may also need to become a member.

There is also the slightly unnerving sight of the deserted town of Cisco, which once thrived but where a only a handful of people now live.

Once you've finished soaking up the atmosphere around Moab, a more relaxed river expedition awaits on the San Juan River, leaving from Bluff.

The archaeological trip will see your guide explain the spectacular geology of the surrounding area, with stops to see ancient paintings and ruins on the way.

However, both the boat trips come with a health warning: in the

sun they would be fantastic, but in autumnal rain it gets cold and wet.

There is also the unavoidable need to urinate in bushes near the river.

The differences between the rural life here and that in most parts of the UK was brought home by the fact that San Juan County got its first mobile-phone mast in the week I visited.

Another great place to embrace the great outdoors is Capitol Reef National Park, which has a variety of hikes including the Sulphur Canyon route.

Coming back to urban surroundings, Salt Lake City is a pleasant and nicely laid-out town, with chances for fine dining and a night out in a bar, as well as good shopping.

● Travel facts:

Margaret travelled with United Vacations. Reservations: 0844 499 2299 and www.unitedvacations.co.uk



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LOTS TO PHOTOGRAPH: Native American Ruins along the San Juan River



STUNNING SCENERY: A rock arch at Arches National Park, Utah

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